

Eternal Sunshine #17

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Quote Of The Month – “I’m not a stalker. You’re the one who talked to me, remember?” (Joel in “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind”)

Welcome to the special honeymoon issue of Eternal Sunshine, the Diplomacy subzine anxiously awaiting the wide release of “Romance and Cigarettes” so we can go see Kate Winslet dance around in a red vinyl dress. Okay, granted, that doesn’t have anything to do with a honeymoon, but so what? If you don’t like it, got start your own subzine!

Plenty of people have told me how backwards I am, which is all the more reason why I’m treating you to the story of our recent honeymoon before I ever give you the detailed story of the wedding itself! Actually, the reason is pretty simple: we don’t have all the wedding pictures back yet! I’d rather tell the story (however much of it might be interesting anyway) when I have the photos to illustrate the scenes when necessary. So instead I skipped ahead to the honeymoon, where we took our own photos (and where photos are not as necessary to describe the events).

Besides that, you get more of the usual foolishness this issue. I’m still trying to fill my Diplomacy opening, with two spots left (assuming all those who signed up are still interested). I’m also offering a Gunboat 7X7 tournament, on a whim. If you’d like to try that let me know. I haven’t decided how much of the results would appear here, and how much by email or flyer.

This issue also includes another written narrative, in this case the story of one of the worst days of my life. For whatever reason I felt the urge to write about it back before the wedding, maybe to purge it from my mind before I took the plunge and got married again. I don’t know. Regardless, I think I need to return to the subject of prison in my writing projects, because I am really hoping to collect some of these pieces (and those not yet completed) with an eye towards having them published in book form. And I don’t mean self-published vanity press, I mean finding a literary agent and approaching major publishers. Then later I can write about other topics. But since I have a lot of prison material compiled already, that seems to be the subject I could most easily build on to get enough material. Plus, many of you have told me how interesting you’ve found my pieces. Oh, which reminds me, if there is a particular aspect of prison you would like to know more about, let me know; perhaps I can use that as inspiration for another narrative.

Hmm, not sure what else to tell you. Married life is wonderful, Heather is the most incredible woman in the universe, and I can’t begin to imagine why the heck she puts up with me. I’ve been working too hard lately, but it sound like that is a universal condition these days. I keep hoping to catch my breath, only to get sucker-punched in the stomach when I start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Still, I come home to a beautiful soul mate and two loving cats every night...even if Toby is only loving half the time, and the other half he wants to climb up my leg like I’m a rock wall, using his claws as his climbing pins...and even if Tigger likes to be left alone most of the time, preferring to whine for attention only at the least convenient moments. Enjoy your holidays, and most likely you’ll see the next issue of Eternal Sunshine just before the New Year. Which reminds me, the new Joe Jackson CD comes out on January 8th. And you thought you had nothing to look forward to in 2008, didn’t you? How wrong you were!

The Honeymoon

Two weeks before our wedding, there was still some question as to whether or not we were going to have a honeymoon at all. The problem wasn't paying for one (a modest one anyway), or getting the time off of work, or even getting my travel permission from my Probation Officer. Instead, the problem was Heather's injured ankle. Swollen, bruised, terribly painful, and requiring crutches, it didn't seem like travelling to a small Texas town like Jefferson to enjoy old Victorian houses, a walking ghost tour, and local shops was a particularly doable plan.

I was certainly disappointed, but to be honest I was more unhappy for Heather. The first time she'd been married there was no honeymoon whatsoever. As a matter of fact, Heather had very little say in anything regarding that marriage, including the ceremony. It took all of her efforts to keep her fiancée Joe from wearing "a nice pair of jeans" as his wedding outfit. Which is why I convinced her to go ahead with the idea of a real wedding in the first place; I wanted this wedding to fit her ideas and her personality exactly. It didn't matter what conventional wisdom demanded – I wanted her to do things HER way. Which is exactly what we did: from the Halloween date, to all the spooky decorations, to the plastic spiders Heather's daughter Bailey sprinkled along with the rose petals, to our standing in the opposite positions during the ceremony (I was on the left), the wedding was Heathersque in every detail.

My desire was that the honeymoon could fit that bill as well, which is the main reason we chose Jefferson, Texas as our destination. Long regarded as a hotspot for ghosts and unexplained sights, this little bed and breakfast town includes some nice antique shops, a number of old Victorian homes, and a quaint and generally quiet downtown...plus it carries with it the slow and friendly atmosphere which is specific to Texas country living. Aside from all of that, Heather's mother had stayed in Jefferson years ago, and ever since then Heather has dreamed of being able to enjoy some time there herself. This honeymoon was supposed to be the realization of those dreams.

For me, I was just happy that Heather hadn't broken anything, or been put into a huge cast. That would have been too reminiscent of my first marriage and accompanying honeymoon. When Mara and I were wed, she had been in the hospital with a nasty attack of Crohn's Disease up to two days before the wedding. The only way she was able to make it to the ceremony was for the doctors to pump her full of IV cortisone steroids (a common treatment for Crohn's). Then the honeymoon itself became a big disaster, with Mara being terribly ill combined with the nightmare of poor service and problems when we arrived at the lodge in the Pocono Mountains where we had planned to stay. I detailed the story for my Diplomacy zine subscribers at the time, but I think one brief scene illustrates the type of experience we had: our private cabin had its own indoor pool, in a separate room. It also had a huge wasp nest in the corner of that room. When I called the front desk to complain, they made sure to act on the problem: within thirty minutes, one of their employees knocked on our door and gave us our own personal can of wasp spray, then turned and walked away. You shouldn't be surprised to learn that we checked out an hour later, and spent the rest of the honeymoon in a local hotel (with Mara's illness being a continued problem throughout).

Enough about the past, let's return to the present. As the wedding approached it seemed like Heather's ankle was doing a bit better. Walking was going to be limited, but we both felt pretty confident that we'd be able to spend at least a few hours enjoying the downtown area. We had made reservations for a room at the Claiborne House, one of the Jefferson-area bed and breakfasts we'd found on the internet. Our room had actually been reserved almost six months in advance, so it seemed a shame to waste it. Fortunately, as luck would have it, we'd selected the only room they had on the first floor of the house – mainly because of the working fireplace (in case the weather was cool enough) and the two-person whirlpool tub. The drive from Dallas would only be in the area of three hours, so Heather gave us the green light, and the honeymoon plans stayed in effect.

Because our wedding didn't end until 10pm, and because we then had to pack up all of our Halloween wedding decorations and have them out of the house so they could use it for an upcoming function, we chose to make our honeymoon schedule begin the following morning. The idea was that we'd sleep in a bit, pack, take the cats to the vet to be boarded for two nights, and then drive on to Jefferson from there. If we left home by noon, even with Dallas traffic and possible construction (which always seems to be going on somewhere on the interstate) we'd arrive at The Claiborne House no later than 4pm. Of course, considering Heather was either 23 or 27 minutes late for our first date (the exact time still being disputed between us), I never expected to actually leave by noon. Not a big deal though – the schedule was pretty open.

A few days before the wedding, however, we did alter those plans slightly, as we decided not to bring Tigger to the vet at all, but instead to leave her at home alone for the two days we'd be away. She gets to frantic and upset in the car, and when she's out of her element, we simply felt the risk of her being here by herself was less than that of boarding her for two nights. Toby, on the other hand, was another matter altogether. There was simply no way we could leave him home alone. He gets in way too much mischief, and being a total piglet I don't

see a way we could have left out enough food and water for both cats. Plus, we wanted to get Toby implanted with a microchip in case he ever takes an unplanned vacation when we're not watching. At least that way there's a chance we'd get him back!

Thursday morning we were late getting out of the house, but overall things went fine. Minutes before we left we got a call from the bed and breakfast, asking about the special candlelight dinner we had reserved. I had failed to specify whether we wanted it on the first night of our visit (as I'd actually planned), or the second night. Elaine, one of the owners of The Claiborne House (and the one preparing the meal) was just getting over a chest cold and was hoping we preferred the second night. As it happened, Heather **had** changed her mind about Thursday anyway, and we agreed Friday would work best for everyone. So that bit of uncertainty was quickly settled. Next, it was time for a stop at the vet. Dropping Toby off was a bit emotional, since Heather and I are both big babies and spoil the cats rotten. This was the first time we'd been away from him since we adopted him, and Toby is a VERY affectionate cat. I was concerned that he'd be very scared while boarded, or else that he'd think we had left him for good. After all, he had been in the care of the animal rescue group for who knows how long before we adopted him, so he might remember that experience. I probably have a tendency to humanize my pet's actions beyond reality, but so what?

Traffic on the way to Jefferson was much worse than I expected, almost exclusively due to construction. I've never seen drivers like those in Texas: the simple concept of merging two lanes into one is beyond their comprehension. You'd think they'd never seen a zipper before! So even though the actual number of vehicles on the road was rather small, in numerous locations we hit backups which snaked for more than a mile where two lanes merged into one – despite the merges being announced by multiple signs miles in advance. Just another fun aspect to driving in Texas...almost as much fun as watching so many Texas drivers race off the interstate, over the medians and shoulders, and onto the service roads in an attempt to get around these merge fiascos. And I don't just mean those who drive big SUV's or trucks...it isn't unusual to see an occasional Ford Taurus or Kia Rio make the same maneuver!

When we reached the Jefferson area, just north of Marshall on US 59, it became clear that Yahoo and Mapquest had some less-than-accurate ideas about how the local streets were laid out. We were supposed to turn right onto a Walker Street, but no such road existed as far as we could tell. I'm terrific at reading a map, but without one I'm basically blind, so it took two phone calls to Elaine before we found our way there. Since we had never stayed at a bed and breakfast before, I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but the initial view of the exterior and interior of the house suggested we were in for a very pleasant stay.



The house itself was built in 1872, although there are now two additional buildings in the back – one containing the day spa, and the other a carriage house with two guest rooms inside. We had reserved the Browning Room, which featured a private entrance on the side of the house. This proved to be another stroke of luck, as it made it much easier for the hobbled Heather to make it in and out of the house. Incidentally, if you'd like to see more details of the Claiborne House, perhaps with a mind towards staying there, check out their web site at <http://claibornehousebnb.com/> - and as long as you are there, it's probably a smart idea to read the travelling directions they have posted there. If I'd bothered to do that, I wouldn't have gotten lost in the first place! Don't forget to mention you heard about them from Heather and myself. It won't save you

any money or anything, but at least she'll take pity on you, realizing that anybody who is a friend of mine probably NEEDS a vacation!

Elaine met us at the front door and gave us a tour of the downstairs. We had to skip the upstairs because the staircase is l-o-n-g and Heather simply didn't want to chance it. But from what we were able to see, the house was beautiful. The striking red walls, the classic furniture, the gorgeous red or cobalt blue glassware...it had a marvelous feel to it, and it was clear that Elaine and her husband Steve (who was away on a business trip) had

put a lot of work and a lot of love into the home. I was quite surprised to learn they had cable television and wireless internet within the house for the use of the guests! I was going to enjoy the romantic aspects of the bed and breakfast, but those modern conveniences were simply welcome bonuses we would greatly appreciate.

It was already 6pm by the time we had unpacked and settled into our room, and since Heather was obviously unable to participate in something like a walking tour of the haunted Jefferson homes, we figured the best plan was to go grab a bite to eat and then return to the room for the night. Might as well make use of the canopied bed and the two-person whirlpool tub right away! Heather wanted some home-style cooking, so Elaine suggested a casual bar and restaurant downtown which had a reputation of being a favorite among locals. It wasn't hard to find, and we had no complaints with what we found. The portions were ample, the food tasty, and the prices reasonable. Service was rather slow, but I figured that was more just the relaxed pace of country life. We split some fried mushrooms, and while I ate a juicy burger, Heather enjoyed chicken-fried chicken with country gravy, along with the Texas staples of mashed potatoes and green beans. Satisfied, we returned to our room where we relaxed for the evening. Heather was happy to realize the water jets in the tub were rather therapeutic for her injured ankle too!



Friday morning we slept in a bit, and then enjoyed a delicious breakfast in the dining room. Elaine had prepared strawberry soup, bacon, orange juice, an egg dish with peppers, and some delicious rolls. There were also some dangerous tiny cinnamon rolls – frosted and delicate, much like the center of the bigger version (which is, after all, the best part)! Mmmm! I was disappointed to realize we wouldn't be able to stay long enough for the Saturday breakfast, because we had to be back to the vet by noon or else Toby would be stuck there until Monday. At breakfast we met the only other couple who had been there Thursday night – a pleasant married couple from the Dallas area. I believe the gentleman was an Episcopalian minister, and his wife did work for the church. They were only staying for a few days too, since they needed to be back by Saturday night. I should also mention that at this meal Heather learned one of the most important wifely duties she needs to adopt – always check your husband before he goes out in public! It turned out I had my sweater on backwards, which we didn't realize until Elaine politely told me after breakfast. Poor Heather – a lifetime with me? Shudder...

The weather Friday was perfect for a day walking around town – breezy, sunny, and not too warm. Heather and I spent the day going through local shops. Some were the garden-variety “antique” stores, stuffed with overpriced clutter of questionable authenticity. A few had some very nice pieces, including attractive furniture, but we're not in the market for anything...hard to buy things when you are tight with money and live in a one-bedroom apartment! Then in one candle/curio shop, Heather found a section of new clothing, all priced to move: \$7.77 per piece! Clothes shopping was the last thing I expected to suffer through on a honeymoon in Jefferson, but in the end she found quite a few very nice articles at bargain prices, plus a new winter coat (not that we get much winter) and a few gifts for the upcoming holidays.

In another store we met Booger, a cute store cat who liked to play rough just like our Toby. He chewed on my fingers a bit, and then we got into an interesting (but too long) conversation with the proprietor about life in Jefferson, renting out her second home for vacationers, and the surplus of stray animals in the area. Breaking free of that, we enjoyed some local barbecue, including what Heather declared was the best potato salad she had ever tasted. In fact, she looked positively heartbroken when she'd finished it! Then it was back to the Claiborne House to rest and prepare for dinner. We sat on our private porch swing for a bit, listening to nothing and holding each other, and then went inside for Heather's nap. She gets soooo cranky when she's tired!

First, Heather went to the Claiborne's day spa, A Touch of Class, for an hour-long massage. I sort of had to talk her into scheduling one, but I knew she'd enjoy it and after all, it was our honeymoon! At first I was only going to reserve a half hour, but Elaine showed me that they priced them specifically to discourage that, as 30 minutes

was simply not long enough for the proper luxurious effect. I think the second 30 minutes was only like \$10 more. In this case it wasn't the money I was concerned about, but rather I wanted to leave Heather enough time for a proper nap too before dinner. While she had her stresses rubbed away, I fought through all the emails which had backed up in my mailboxes. Then it was nap time!



After a nice rest, it was almost time for dinner. We'd scheduled this meal months in advance, and because I had no experience with a bed and breakfast I hadn't understood why we both had to order the same food. Now that we were here, I could see how difficult it would have been for Elaine to prepare multiple meals. In fact, later on I asked and discovered that if more than one couple wants a candlelight dinner on the same night, the first one to order gets to select the menu. Everybody else has to agree to that menu, or skip the meal. Having this dinner in our room was a touch of romantic extravagance, but how many honeymoons with my soul mate do I get anyway?

The meal consisted of butternut squash soup (pictured), fresh rolls, a delicious spinach and walnut salad (with strawberries), filet mignon, asparagus, and an incredible chocolate soufflé for dessert. The only problem with the meal was trying to find a place to fit it all! Elaine was kind enough to wrap up the bit of meat we left, so the cats could enjoy it when we got home. Since our room had a private fridge, there was no problem finding a place to store it until we left. The whole meal was a delicious feast, and I put on our wedding reception CD's (which we had burned ourselves) as background music. I'll list the songs next issue, when I give you all the details of the actual wedding...I'm waiting until we have the photos, so I can include a few of them with the narrative. Besides, this thing is too long already!

In the left side of the table photo, you'll see the table includes a little silver bell. This was a source of minor amusement for me during the meal. Elaine asked that we ring the bell as we finished each course, so she'd know to clear one away and bring the next one. Heather is so cute and unassuming that she did NOT feel comfortable ringing it. She actually asked Elaine if it would be okay to get up and find her when we needed her. Heather found the idea of ringing the bell to be too "snotty". Elaine just laughed and said not to worry about it. But Heather still was very nervous about the idea. She is far too down-to-earth to act haughty like that. She'll never fit into the Hollywood scene, will she? She did explain that when she used to visit her great aunt Martha Wallis (famous actress, and wife of producer Hal Wallis) every meal would be formal with servants, and it always made her nervous. I can't begin to tell you how lucky I am that this wonderful woman was foolish enough to fall in love with, and marry, a creep like me! I definitely do not deserve her!

After dinner we spent some romantic time on the porch swing again, while Heather told me all about living in the country when she was growing up, and the porch swing they had. I never get tired of listening to her, or learning about the things which made her the woman she is today. Someday we want to have our own little house, and what could be better than a big porch with a swing as



part of that? It doesn't take a lot to make us happy...we've both reached the point in our lives where the little things are all we dream about. Besides, I already found the most important thing – her!

Then it was back into the tub, this time with rose petals scattered around for a romantic effect. I bet Heather could really get used to living in that room, but unfortunately Saturday morning we had to leave by 8am to keep Toby from being stuck “in prison” for an extra two days. Traffic on the way back was light, and we made great time. Heather, of course, slept almost the entire way. Toby was very glad to see us, and so was Tigger...but I am sure she was pissed off when she realized Toby was back too. I believe she was starting to think she'd gotten rid of him for good!

I had a wonderful time on our honeymoon, and the only thing I'd have changed (aside from making Heather's ankle uninjured) was to make it longer. But the good news is I am now married to the most beautiful, charming, magical, desirable, irresistible, sexy, enchanting, and deliciously bossy woman in the universe. If we didn't get enough of Jefferson – which we didn't – all we have to do is go back for our anniversary! We're already busy reading up on all the things we missed the first time around!

Hmm, this seems like an odd pairing of topics doesn't it? But now that I've given you all the details of our honeymoon, next up is the story of the worst day of my life...I finished this upcoming narrative BEFORE the wedding day, so I'm not brooding on the past too much. But it helps to get it out on paper, especially since I think I may write a book about the whole relationship, and I enjoy the feedback (positive and negative) I get from those of you who read my work.

The Suicide Attempt

When my wife Mara attempted suicide in 1998, I certainly wasn't surprised. I mean, I was shocked that she had actually gone through with it, after years of talking about it and considering it. I wouldn't say **threatening** it, because Mara never threatened to kill herself. It was never about anybody else; if she was going to end her life, it was because she no longer wanted to live, not a cry for attention or a warped method of revenge. In fact, in some ways I know she felt that if she killed herself, she'd be doing me a favor, freeing me to try and live a less downtrodden life. Sadly, she never saw that when you kill yourself, the loved ones you leave behind are left with a mountain of guilt, second-guessing, and should-haves. When you take that mountain and top it off with the realization that the suicide was in some ways committed for your own benefit, the mental anguish can be overwhelming.

Mara's mental and physical health had been deteriorating for some time. She never wanted to do much more than lay in bed, except for the occasional attempt at going out to dinner, which at least one time out of four would end in a quick departure when her Crohn's disease would kick into high gear. My mother was living with us at the time, as she had no place else to go after she stopped receiving alimony. Having her around the house didn't make things any easier. It was an added expense, and a source of both stress and argument. The house we were renting was never especially clean, as I was the only one doing most of the housework, and the five cats that lived with us could be quite a handful. Now with the garage completely filled with boxes of my mother's belongings, and piles of newspapers she “hadn't read yet” beginning to form randomly in the kitchen, the entire situation was spinning out of control.

My mental health was nothing to smile about either. I'd fought through some real depression over the summer, at one point losing my appetite for a week, surviving on just black coffee, Cran-grape, and vitamins. Mara and I had already had one tearful conversation where I'd told her I was suffocating and needed some time to myself at least once or twice a week...but on those occasions all I generally would do was go out to a bar. I knew she was genuinely concerned that I might intentionally hurt myself. It had also been over three years since we'd had any sex; so long, in fact, that I really no longer felt sexual desire at all. It was a very confusing relationship, with Mara telling me that we should just live as roommates from that point onward and I should go develop new female relationships, but staying married so she could still be on my health insurance. But one night she'd press me on why I wasn't out with anyone else, and basically bullying me out of the house (sometimes throwing things until I left). The next night she'd accuse me of being unfaithful, as if the prior conversation had never taken place. I didn't know what to do, or who to turn to.

Her sister came down to visit for a week or so in early November, and the two of them had gotten into a screaming fight with my mother. It was during this conversation where my mother tried to claim that a few weeks earlier, when she'd fallen on the sidewalk and hurt her ankle (in front of passers-by), she in fact had “tried to kill herself by jumping off a bridge.” By the end of the argument, my mother had basically talked herself into a corner, threatening to move out. Instead of being defensive and retreating, Mara demanded a deadline she'd be out by, which turned out to be the end of the year. When I came home from work, exhausted as usual, nobody was speaking to anybody. Coming home was no longer something I looked forward to doing.

I could tell things were really getting bad after Thanksgiving. I'd had the flu over the holiday, but still cooked us a small turkey and other dishes. Mara wasn't showering much, or doing anything really. She'd lie in bed, dressed in underwear and maybe a flannel nightgown, watching TV and sleeping, although sleeping was something she usually did during the day now, unless her Crohn's was acting up. In that case she'd spend most of her time in the bathroom in terrible pain, and then take two pain pills every few hours until she was doped up enough to pass out. She refused to call her psychiatrist for additional help, and I wasn't sure if her weekly therapy appointments were doing any good at all.

I'd made up my mind one morning to call Mara's mother in New Jersey, who I did not care much for (and always felt the feeling was mutual) and suggest she come down or give me some direction on how to handle things. Mara, in uncharacteristic fashion, had called her mother, sister, and brother to talk to them. Usually she'd avoid them at all costs, refusing to answer the phone or speak to them, even when I picked it up and held it to her ear. So I took this as a sign that she might be making the rounds to say goodbye or something. She hadn't said anything specific about suicide around me, but to be honest that in itself was a sign of bad things, since usually the subject would come up in passing at least once a week.

When I arrived at work that morning, there was some sort of system problem that had to be dealt with immediately, so I lost myself in that headache for a few hours. Once everything was up and running again, I went to my little office (more of a windowless closet really, but that's another story) with a cup of coffee. I returned two or three urgent calls from out-of-town customers who had their own system issues, and then took a long sip of coffee and a deep breath, preparing to call Mara's mother.

Just then my phone rang, and I found to my complete surprise that it was Mara's mother calling me instead of the other way around.

"I was just going to call you" I said. "I need to talk to you about Mara. She isn't doing well."

"I know," her mother replied in a very odd voice. "I'm here in Dallas, at the emergency room. Mara tried to kill herself."

I didn't really know what to say or what to do when I heard Mara had actually tried to kill herself, after all those years of talking about it and thinking about it. I didn't even bother to ask what method she had used. I just grabbed my coat, told two friends at work where I was going (without leaving any chance for them to do anything in response but let their mouths drop open) and dashed out. The hospital where they had taken her was right down the street from my office, so it only took about two minutes to pull into the Emergency Room parking area and get inside.

It wasn't until I'd had a moment to collect my thoughts in the ER that I began to wonder how it came to pass that Mara's mother (and her sister) were waiting for me at the hospital. After all, they lived in New Jersey, and they hadn't said anything about coming to town. Once we'd hugged and I'd been updated on Mara's immediate condition (stable, and busy getting her stomach pumped), they filled in all the missing details for me.

As it turned out, Mara's mother and sister had been operating under the same suspicions that I had: that Mara's behavior over the past week, especially calling her family members and talking to them without being prodded to do so, was both completely out of character and alarming. So the two of them decided the best way to handle the situation was to fly down without warning Mara that they were coming, in order to confront her and possibly get her into some kind of mental hospital. I suppose there was a chance of that working; my attempts to get Mara to go back into the hospital had been summarily rejected, but often Mara could be swayed by her parents or sister...partially out of guilt, and partially because she so desperately craved a more meaningful and understanding relationship with her family, and to have them take a selfless interest in her well-being like this was sure to mean a lot to her. Whether it would have meant enough to act on their wishes, or whether she would have simply waited a few days for them to leave and then proceed with her plan anyway, we will never know.

For whatever reason, they chose not to tell me about the visit in advance either. I can't really blame them, as I have no way of knowing now whether back then I would have allowed my sense of loyalty to Mara (especially when it came to her family) to reveal their plans so she could mentally prepare herself. Arriving at the airport, the two of them rented a car and drove out to the house we had been renting. Knocking at the door, they were greeted by my mother, who neither of them had met in person before. Well, "greeted" is a polite way to put it. When my mother opened the door, they introduced themselves.

The conversation was very brief. I'm told it went something like this: they explained that they were Mara's mother and sister. Then they asked my mother how she was. She grunted and said "Alive," walked to her bedroom, and closed the door. That was the last they saw of her during the time they were at the house.

Left alone, the two of them went into our bedroom, where they found Mara asleep on the bed. They tried to wake her and discovered she was terribly groggy. Noticing an empty bottle on pills on the bed next to her, they asked Mara if she had taken anything. She admitted that she'd taken the entire bottle of Xanax (maybe 20 pills), and had planned on taking a full bottle of 90 Darvocet as well, but passed out before she'd had time. Four suicide notes were left on the other side of the bed: one to her parents, one to her brother, one to her sister, and one to me.

They frantically called an ambulance. When the paramedics arrived, Mara was still able to walk to the stretcher under her own power. They raced to the hospital, where they took Mara in to pump her stomach, and Mara's mother called me at work. It was a tremendous stroke of luck that they'd happened to choose that particular day to fly down, because otherwise there was little or no chance that she would have been found until I came home from work that afternoon. By that time, I'm sure it would have been too late.

As we sat in the waiting room, the inevitable questions and recriminations started. I had learned to expect and deal with these sorts of conversations from Mara's family. Of course, I already felt guilty enough as it was. After all, the woman I had basically devoted my entire life to caring for and making happy was lying in the other room having a bottle of pills pumped out of her stomach. What better illustration could there be of my complete and utter failure in every regard? But I still didn't need the third degree from these people, especially when in my opinion they'd never done anything to help the situation. When we were married (or before) Mara had become *my* problem. The family's place was to sit back and offer criticism whenever they felt it was necessary.

"Why haven't you done anything to help her?" "Why wasn't she in the hospital?" "How could you let it come to this?" "Why didn't you see this coming?" "Why hasn't she lost any weight?" "Why why why why why why why why why why why?" Pretty soon that's all I could hear. A never-ending barrage of whys, each one pointed directly at me, the guilty one, the worthless one, the useless one, the failure, the one who was never good enough for their daughter and sister. All those titles slapped on my back, with a new one added for the occasion, in flashing neon: attempted murderer.

And as if things weren't bad enough for me, the worst was yet to come. I was about to discover that, just like with every other physical ailment she'd suffered through, the process of pumping Mara's stomach and cleaning her system out was going to be far more complicated than anyone imagined. Whenever we heard that "99% of people" experienced things a certain way, we both knew that Mara would turn out to be in the other 1% - as long as the 1% was a *bad* thing. That trend was going to continue.

My years with Mara had given me quite a bit of experience with medical matters. I was now an expert in the uses and side effects of many prescription drugs, as well as fully knowledgeable in how they interacted with each other. Chronic headaches, migraines, blood disorders, and mental problems (both psychological and chemical in nature) were as commonplace topics to me as the weather or football scores. And, not to be left out, intestinal problems and bowel habits had for years been an involuntary subject of focus in my amateur studies.

But now I was about to get an education in a number of other medical areas.

To begin with, after pumping her stomach, Mara's lungs were not operating at full strength. The doctors were not exactly sure why, although they suspected it was the sedative properties of the pills she had taken. In fact, alarmingly, that lung function seemed to be getting worse, not better, over time. Mara would not completely come around from her drugged state. Receiving her nourishment through an IV, we were allowed to give her ice chips, which was the only word she seemed able to speak on those occasions when she opened her eyes. "Chips, chips" she would whisper like a mantra, but the staff would only allow us to give her a few at a time. Otherwise, we tried to keep her lips moist with a sponge-like tip on a plastic stick, kept in a glass of cold water. While much of this period seems like a terrible, vague nightmare to me, I do have clear visions of the three of us (and Mara's brother, who flew down to join us) giving her ice chips and wetting her lips. I know that Mara's father flew to Texas too, but strangely I don't remember him being at the hospital even though I am certain he was there.

The initial problem, aside from how unresponsive Mara was, was her temperature. Mara started with a low-grade fever and it rose until it hovered around 102, sometimes higher. Despite days of trying whatever they could think of, this fever refused to dissipate. The doctors couldn't find any sign of infection, and they simply could find no explanation for the fever. But it wasn't helping matters.

Things should have been going better, but they weren't. Mara was burning up, she wasn't responding properly, she seemed basically immobile, and her lungs were not getting stronger. They decided at one point it was necessary to insert a breathing tube because her oxygen levels were not high enough. This didn't sound like such a terrible thing to me, until it was explained that the longer she was getting assistance with her breathing, the weaker her lungs would actually become. Like any other part of the body, having someone else move them for you wasn't nearly as effective as being able to move them yourself. I tried my best not to worry about the long-term aspects of this, since there was so much to be concerned about right on front of us.

I think the problems with Mara's fever went on for about a week or longer. The doctors tried two different types of antibiotics in case the problem was an undetected internal infection, and none of them showed any result. Finally a young doctor came up with the unorthodox idea of giving Mara some nitroglycerine medication (the type they give to heart patients). His theory was this would open her system up and allow her body to expel the fever through her skin, since he believed the reason the fever would not come down was Mara's skin not properly opening its pores (or something like that). Miraculously, this seemed to work, and Mara's fever finally dropped. Things were starting to improve.

With the stabilization of her fever, Mara was become more conscious and was able to react to us when she was awake. It was at this point that the doctors gave us some more news we didn't want to hear. Mara's lungs were still not able to breathe properly on their own, but the breathing tube was only meant to be a temporary measure. In order to minimize any internal damage, and to make it easier to wean her off the breathing assistance, it was necessary to remove the tube and replace it with a tracheotomy. This didn't sound so terrible to me, until the doctors explained that they were not sure if this tracheotomy could be reversed at a later date. In other words, Mara might have to have a tracheotomy tube (or hole) for a long period, or perhaps for the rest of her life.

While this was not the worst moment in the entire nightmare for me, it was one of them. I don't remember Mara's mother, who was alone with me when we got this news, ever let her guard down and her emotions show more completely than right then. Crying, choking, and looking utterly lost and helpless, she fell apart. Obviously she was trying to build hope within herself that Mara could recover from this not just physically, but mentally, and learn to love life. "How can we look at Mara and tell her that things are going to be worse for her now than they ever were? She'll just want to kill herself all over again."

I didn't have an answer. I'd been trying not to think of the future at all, because deep down I did not believe that this experience was going to convince Mara that life was suddenly worth living. In my mind, while I wanted to imagine she'd climb out of this hole and begin to look at life in a whole new way, I figured Mara would have only one long-term response to this suicide attempt: next time she would plan it better to make sure nobody could stop her.

We were determined that regardless of how we really felt, everyone around Mara would make an attempt to act positive once she started coming around. Now that her fever was under control, and her breathing was better (for the time being) because of the tracheotomy, we felt she was finally stabilized and ready to move forward. By this time, she had spent a good week or longer in ICU. Whether it was simply due to my utterly hopeless mental state, or simply because I had learned the hard way that life could always get worse, I tried to prepare myself for the next disaster. There had to be one coming; there always was.

In the meantime, I was forcing myself to continue through life day by day. When I came home around midnight the evening Mara attempted suicide, my mother was still awake. She did not come out and ask me how Mara was doing, or why she'd left in an ambulance. She didn't ask me the next day either. In fact, she never asked; she never said a word about anything. Instead, about ten days later I came home to find she had left. Plenty of her belongings were left behind, but my mother had moved out as she'd promised Mara. In fact, in her suicide note to me, Mara had specifically asked that I make sure my mother lived up to that promise. I hadn't intended to, but she made that decision for me.

Mara's mother had been staying at a nearby Residence Inn, and now she checked out of there and moved into my mother's old room for the time being. I didn't care – I was rarely home. If I wasn't at work (where I'd be six days a week, for a total of sixty hours) or at the hospital, I was getting drunk, spending time with the friends who could tolerate my presence considering what I was going through, or leaning on a woman who I had started feeling more than friendship for. She didn't have a real understanding of the nature of my marriage of convenience, and that always made me feel worse even when I was trying to feel better. It just seemed way too complicated to explain, so during those periods when the relationship was more than friendship, I played it off as if we were sneaking around behind Mara's back, when in fact she was the one who had demanded I find companionship elsewhere. During the time Mara was in the hospital, though, it was all she or anyone else could do to keep me from killing myself or someone else. How I got through this time without a complete nervous

breakdown in beyond me. Instead I survived, and beat myself up with guilt for doing so whenever I get a chance.

To top it off, financially we were in a horrible mess. The only way I was able to continue paying the minimum payments on all of our credit cards was to apply for new ones, or take cash advances from those which offered them. Whenever possible I'd pay for meals or clothes or anything else for friends, charging the purchases and getting some cash back to help pay the other bills. Mara and I had talked about bankruptcy a number of times, but we'd never thrown in the towel and done it, and now I couldn't face that nightmare while I was busy with this one. So I tried to ignore the problem, and when I couldn't I'd drink it away.

Back at the hospital, as Mara spent more time awake each day, doctors were confronted with a new riddle: her immobility. She seemed barely able to move anything on her own except her head and neck. This was when they discovered (don't ask me how) that during the "gastric lavage" – a fancy term for pumping somebody's stomach – Mara must have had a rare reaction to the paralytic drug she was given. I can't recall all the details, but I know they now expected her to require quite a bit of physical therapy before she'd be able to use her arms and legs properly again. Walking was going to be difficult, but would eventually come back. In addition, her muscle tone was worse than ever simply from being bedridden so long.

We didn't tell Mara any of these specifics. Instead, we simply told her that she'd get her strength back over time. At least she was talking and communicating. Not surprisingly, she was very unhappy that she woke up at all, much less in a hospital ICU with an IV and a tracheotomy. She seemed particularly bitter that I hadn't somehow stopped her relatives from saving her. In fact, I think she suspected I'd told them to come to Texas in the first place. And, as usual, she cursed her terrible luck (from her point of view). When we were alone, she would rattle off a number of other recent times she had considered killing herself. "Why did I have to choose the one day my mother and sister came to rescue me." Mara didn't view it as a sign that she was meant to live. To her, it was a sign that she had been cursed.

Obviously, this suicide attempt was not one to be referred to as a "cry for help."

Eventually, Mara's physical state had improved enough that the hospital wanted to move her out of the ICU and onto the floor which focused on respiratory issues. The main problem the doctors needed to deal with at this point was the state of Mara's lungs. It would take time and treatment for them to build up proper strength. Once they'd done that, they could focus on more aggressive physical therapy to enable her to walk again and move properly; that would likely take place at a different facility. In the meantime, it was felt that after more than three weeks in ICU, it was safe to transfer Mara upstairs.

Mara's mother and I were very anxious about this move. The nurses in the ICU had been tremendous, not just in terms of Mara's medical needs, but also the incredible emotional support they'd given all of us. A suicide attempt, a **real** one, is such a traumatic experience. When someone gives up on life, the guilt which is spread around can make you consider – in a warped way – that making the same choice could end your emotional pain as well. For me, it was all I could do to face myself in the mirror each morning. Between my own self loathing, and the guilt which I saw heaped upon me by Mara's family and the faces of others, this was my fault, 100%. I had failed Mara in every way possible, and I had driven her to this. Wipe away her mental illness, her years of sexual abuse, her physical suffering through Crohn's Disease and horrific migraines; in my mind, I had willed this to happen, I had failed to stop it, I was at best an accomplice and at worst I was guilty of attempted murder. At the same time, I had to carry the guilt from Mara's side, of not being able to somehow allow her to die, condemning her to continue her miserable life.

If I hadn't been so terrified of the idea of death and non-existence, I surely would have killed myself. Well, there was also the gnawing realization that in doing so, I might inflict on my family the same thing which was being inflicted on me. That was the last thing I wanted to do. Besides, I was too damn tired to kill myself, and in my convoluted thinking, suicide would be akin to letting me off the hook. If I was as terrible a person as I now believed myself to be, the act of living would be much more painful than silent nothingness. Death was too easy. I deserved to live, and suffer, and be miserable.

Despite our objections, Mara was transferred up to the respiratory floor. She was still on a feeding tube, and she had an oxygen monitor clipped to her finger at all times to make sure her oxygen level was adequate. The trache tube was still present, staring me in the face every time I looked at her. And now that her lungs had begun to be used, they were slowly emptying themselves of the mucous and debris which had collected there. Coughing fits would be followed by globs of mucous clogging in the trache opening. There was a suction machine next to Mara's bed, with a long wand attached, and we were encouraged to assist by suctioning out mucous if we saw it collected there.

In the meantime, there were other physical and cosmetic issues which I didn't want to deal with. Mara was developing some minor bedsores on the back of her head, where clumps of hair were falling out. I would try to remove the hair as cleverly as possible, but Mara would sometimes notice and get terribly upset. I tried to reassure her, but in the meantime all I could wonder was what sort of terrible bedsores she might be developing elsewhere, such as her back and her butt. Since she was basically immobile still, barely able to lift her hands or wiggle her feet, there was no way for her to lie on one side or the other. With all her weight on her back, 24 hours a day, I knew it couldn't be a pretty sight.

I don't envy the jobs of nurses. They do a ton of work, deal with sick, miserable, cranky people all day long, and are usually shorthanded and understaffed. Unable to make necessary medical decisions without a doctor present, they are usually treated as second class citizens. Despite years of training, they spend a good deal of their time emptying bedpans or completing other disgusting and non-technical functions. Mara's father was a doctor, which meant that for some unclear reason, doctors who had met her father would act more naturally around us than they would other patients. This included yelling or berating nurses without hesitation, which led me to believe that many doctors are simply assholes with God complexes.

Yet in numerous cases, I've had to witness how those nurses who develop a negative attitude, or who numb themselves to the chaos around them, simply become uncaring or lazy – or both. Mara's sister had done work as a blood tech, and would horrify us with stories of nurses refusing to check on patients who were buzzing their nurse call buttons because "he is rude" or "she buzzes too much" or even "she won't turn off the TV when I am talking to her." Once, when a patient in one of the New Jersey hospitals where her father was on staff, Mara became seriously ill because a nurse hadn't given her any of a critical medication for over twelve hours, simply because she was too careless to look at her chart and see that the medication list continued on the second page. If the error hadn't been caught when a doctor wanted to change the dosage, she might have died.

So on December 23rd, when I walked into Mara's room after work to visit her and found her oxygen monitor alarm screeching, I was not really surprised at the lack of attention it was being given. I could see immediately that the clip had simply slipped from Mara's finger, and when I reattached it the machine registered normal oxygen levels and quieted down. Mara explained that the thing had been going off like that for nearly an hour, but nobody had been in to check on her. Meanwhile, the nurse call button, which had been clipped to her dressing gown, has slipped as well and was now dangling off the bed. Unable to push the button, and incapable of yelling, Mara had been forced to lie there and listen to the machine scream bloody murder until I showed up.

In some ways, the relationship between patient and nurse can be similar to that of inmate and prison staff. As a patient (or inmate), you are not free to take care of yourself. You rely on the staff to do certain things for you, and when problems arise you have to decide if it is important enough to bring to their attention. If you complain or cause "trouble" too often, you're generally ignored and suffer for it. Likewise, because they have all the power, you cannot afford to make enemies of them even when you are being mistreated. Basically, you have to suck up to them and thank them for doing their jobs. Sure, there are some who treat you better, who care about your well-being, and those make up for the rest. But when you get stuck with a hard-ass, there isn't a lot you can do. If you make an issue of their job performance, even if you are in the right, you'll likely earn the disdain of their co-workers...and suffer for it in the end.

With that in mind, I went and found a nurse and tried to discuss the situation with the blood monitor. In my mind, the doctor would not have ordered its use if he hadn't thought it was important. Instead, I had to listen to the nurse complain about how the clip kept falling off of Mara's finger, and what a hassle it was to go back in the room to replace it. She'd even tried to find a way to silence the alarm, but no to avail. I tried to sound understanding, while at the same time expressing my concern for Mara's well-being. I think I did a decent job, since I wasn't overly critical and I did not try to lay blame or complain. Since I didn't receive any eye-rolling or arguing or muttering under her breath, I figured I had done the best I could, and returned to Mara's room.

Walking in, I found Mara undergoing a "breathing treatment." This was something which was not only necessary but crucial to her improvement, but which Mara found very unpleasant and uncomfortable. Basically, the respiratory therapist would use a huge football-shaped instrument to force air into Mara's lungs, expanding them as much as possible, and then Mara would be instructed to hold that air (if she could) and then expel it. It was sort of a weightlifting session for her withered lungs. Mara did not want to cooperate, and she'd cry and complain and plead, but at the same time she'd comply because she knew she needed to. I suppose, sentenced to still being alive, Mara knew she'd be happier if she tried to make the best of it...at least until she could attempt another escape from the prison.

The therapist finished the breathing treatment, packed up his stuff, and left. I sat beside Mara's bed, wiping away her tears and holding her hand. She was a bit disoriented, as she always was after a treatment, so I didn't

say anything. I just sat there and wondered how life had gotten off track so terribly, and if things would somehow turn around after this nightmare and begin to improve.

Just then, Mara began to vomit. It wasn't a projectile Exorcist-type explosion. It was more of a gentle burping, filling of her mouth with greenish slop (the nourishment provided by the feeding tube).

But there was a problem: Mara wasn't emptying her mouth; the mush was dribbling out onto her chin and chest, but she couldn't expel it and breathe, as she seemed to have fainted or something. I shouted for help and pushed the call button. Sticking my fingers in Mara's mouth, I tried to clear the airway, but as soon as I would, she'd burp again and more would come out. In the meantime, I used the suction apparatus to clear things more fully, which would allow Mara to get a breath or two at most before a new serving of vomit would appear.

The oxygen machine began to scream again, as the flinger clip had fallen off. I couldn't get up and go for assistance because I feared that if I left her side, Mara would choke to death on the vomit. So I sat there, suctioning out the green slop and calling for help in vain over the machine's alarm. The alarm was screeching, I was yelling, the call button was pushed, and Mara was vomiting.

And nobody was coming.

At the time it seemed like forever...or at least two hours. But in reality, I believe it was approximately 45 minutes. Time and time again Mara would vomit, and I would suction the food from her mouth and trachea hole. I couldn't be sure if she was conscious or not, so in between calling for help I tried to soothingly talk to her, letting her know it was going to be okay. Her eyes would open every once in a while and stare vacantly. I noticed her skin was becoming clammy, and her forehead was hot. I could only assume her fever was returning.

Finally, one of the duty nurses came into the room. Surprisingly, her initial reaction was one of annoyance, which I figure was because she assumed I was doing something I wasn't supposed to be doing. But once she surveyed the situation and realized what was going on, she called for a few other nurses to assist her and took charge of the chaos.

I stood to the side, while the nurses tried to keep me out of the way. As numb as I felt, I was still very irritated, as I found myself with the attitude of "I'm the one who kept her alive for the last 45 minutes, and now you're going to tell me that you know what you're doing?" But I watched as they pulled the feeding tube out (at last), kept her airway clear, lowered her body to level, and looked to get an IV into her arm.

The one thing I **didn't** see them doing was calling a doctor...and that really pissed me off. Obviously, they were trying to protect themselves and hoped to rectify this situation before I (or anyone else) was able to draw attention to their complete failure to do their job properly. Not that I was likely to forget, but if "no harm was done," they wouldn't be open to much criticism...and I'd be regarded as an overprotective, overemotional husband.

The problem was Mara continued to vomit. I could see the nurses were still trying to get the IV in, and then I imagine they'd inject some strong anti-nausea medication to get that under control. Unfortunately, Mara had always had very deep and elusive veins. So they'd jabbed her a number of times, and even thought they had succeeded, but so far the nurses were unable to get Mara stabilized. I continued to ask that a doctor be called, until finally one of the nurses on the sidelines took it upon herself to quietly slip from the room and call for additional assistance.

When the resident arrived in the room a few minutes later, he had a look of complete shock on his face. I am sure he realized that he should have been called in much sooner, as the whole room had been turned upside down, vomit was all over the place, there were close to ten nurses running around like circus clowns climbing in and out of a Volkswagon, and there I was backed up near the windows looking white as a ghost and terrified of what I'd been watching.

Immediately he took command, getting her vitals and realizing the situation was not good. He grabbed the IV needle from the nurse, screaming "We don't have **time** to find a vein there" before inserting it into a vein in Mara's foot. I never would have thought of that, and obviously the nurses hadn't either. Within a couple of minutes the vomiting stopped, and the doctor had been joined by another doctor and two orderlies as they transferred Mara to a stretcher and wheeled her out of the room, on the way back to the ICU.

Obviously Mara's hospitalization didn't end there – she spent another two months between the ICU, hospital, and a respiratory rehabilitation facility before coming home...and that was a story in and of itself. But despite all the miserable moments, beginning with the phone call from Mara's mother, none left as deep and lasting a scar in my memory as those long, terrifying, Twilight Zone minutes I spent desperately trying to keep Mara from choking

to death. In a Hollywood movie, I suppose that would have been the turning point in Mara's life – her true rock bottom, as it were. Unfortunately, while there would be numerous ups and downs in the years to come, in the end the bottoms were destined to sink deeper and deeper.

The Dining Dead - The Eternal Sunshine Movie Reviews

My Kid Could Paint That – This film is a disturbing and thought-provoking documentary which focuses its spotlight in four-year-old Marla Olmstead. Marla is a typical child, except that her paintings have been compared to such artists as Picasso, and they've sold for thousands of dollars. At first this documentary is more of an exposé about the modern art world, where insane amounts of money can be spent on what appears to be random brushstrokes on a canvas. Soon, however, the story turns, and becomes on one hand an examination of the controversy (initiated by a scathing 60 Minutes piece) of whether Marla is in fact the sole artist (or the artist at all); and on the other hand, a social commentary on the obsession this world has with child prodigies, and the drive to expose a child to the media spotlight by Marla's parents (especially her father).

Don't expect any answers; like other successful documentaries (Capturing the Friedman's comes to mind) it is left to the viewer to come to their own conclusions. Is Marla a genius? Is her work a fraud? Is she being exploited for money or fame? Or perhaps all of those things (or a combination) could be true. Director Amir Bar-Lev searches for truth and substantial evidence, while Marla's parents look to the documentary as the reply which will put questions of their honesty and integrity to rest. Like so many other modern media stories, positive can turn to negative in the blink of an eye, and those who enter the world of the spotlight are often left wondering if they would have been better off if they remained in the shadows all along.

There is a brief section after the 60 Minutes piece airs where we are treated to some of the scathing and hateful emails sent to the email address the Olmsteads use for communication regarding Marla's art. I think one comment is the one thought I was left with when I exited the theater: "Better save some of that money you're making for the therapy sessions your daughter is going to need."

The oddest thing about the film was how Marla's father reminded me of Heather's ex-husband. After the film, she told me she'd had the same odd feeling. I have no idea what that means.

The Rape of Europa – The Rape of Europa is a surprisingly moving, effective, and informative documentary. Based on the book by Lynn H. Nicholas, the film explores how the Nazi agenda included not just wiping out certain "sub-human" groups such as the Slavs, Poles, and Jews, but also eradicating their history by destroying their works of art and architecture. At the same time, the Nazis had a systematic program designed to steal and acquire (by means both legal and illegal) the great works of art owned by private collectors and some state galleries.

Both Hitler and Goering had massive personal art collections, although Hitler's was based more on what he found appropriate for the regime, and Goering's was based instead on what he thought was valuable. The Rape of Europa details that these works of art were a major area of consideration for the Nazis and Hitler, to the point where lists of coveted items were cataloged prior to invasions so special units would know what to look for. And the Nazis did not limit themselves to mere paintings and sculpture; furniture, silver, and countless personal items were included in the dual theft/destruction program.

Some of the most moving and interesting stories were details of Jewish art dealers or art supporters whose descendants are still fighting to have stolen items return to them. The details of the evacuation of rare works of art from The Louvre and galleries in St. Petersburg are monumental in scope. The film even discusses the problems the allies faced when bombing during the later stages of the war, trying to decide when a building was of such historical significance that they should refrain from shelling it even when that might mean the loss of more lives (Monte Cassino being the most famous example). And there are interviews with members of the special U.S. units charged with the protecting and restoration of notable works.

While watching this movie, it is hard to reconcile that a group of people could be so monstrous in their genocide, yet still hold such an appreciation for art. And it reminds you that the goal was not simply to kill entire races of people, but to destroy their legacy, in effect erasing all records of their existence. Even now, 60 years after the war ended, the scenes where some Torah decorative tips were returned to the family which donated them to a

synagogue decades earlier brings tears to your eyes. Try to see this film, in the theater or on DVD. It's worth your time.

I Want Someone to Eat Cheese With – This is a quiet comedy with its roots in the Chicago Second City comedy family. It stars Jeff Garlin (Larry David's manager on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*) as a lonely loser. His character James is an actor who has never really succeeded in the business. He's lonely, he's overweight, he lives with his mother, and he hasn't had sex in five years. His life in many ways parallels that of Ernest Borgnine in *Marty* (James' favorite movie), which is used as a subplot since they are remaking that film in Chicago, and James is told he isn't right for the part. In fact, James isn't right for anything. His sort-of girlfriend dumps him, he loses his agent, and he can't find a decent acting job.

Along the way he meets two women at opposite ends of the spectrum. First there is the young and crazy character played by Sarah Silverman, and then the serious and also lonely schoolteacher played by Bonnie Hunt. He's attracted to Silverman, but obviously has more in common with the schoolteacher. Yet in many ways James still lives the life of an adolescent, which helps continue his loneliness.

There are no big dramatic answers to life's riddles in this film, and no major character revelations. James must try to learn to like himself, to grow up, and move forward with his life and his career in a way that carries the possibility of fulfillment. There are some laugh-out-loud moments, some quiet humor, and some jokes which seem like they'd be better placed in a sitcom. But overall the movie is an enjoyable and fast 80 minutes. Since it doesn't overstay its welcome, I think you might enjoy it too.

Seen on DVD – **The Lonely Guy** (A-, Heather had never seen this movie but I still love to watch it once every year or so, classic Steve Martin with classic Neil Simon humor. Charles Grodin is perfect); **The Devil's Rejects** (B- or C+, sequel to Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses*, it didn't have the same visual effects, and some of the violence was a bit much, but for a goofy Halloween movie this wasn't too bad...a few laughs along the way too); **Kinky Boots** (B, soft-hearted British comedy, I enjoyed it at home but would probably have been bored in the theater); **Who the #\$% is Jackson Pollock?** (B-, quirky documentary, but this woman is an idiot on so many levels).

Meet Me In Montauk

The Eternal Sunshine Letter Column

Tom Swider: Managed to make my way through *INLAND EMPIRE* a second time, and I picked up a lot more. Many ways of looking at it, so you can choose "an opening" of your own choice. One of the obvious choices is the Hitchcock route of the actor/actress blurring their reality with the reality of their character. Because directors don't shoot the scenes in chronological order, it adds to that confusion. My own working theory is that the story is most accurately told by the female Asian street person near the end of the movie.

I'll have to keep that in mind. Speaking of chronological order, have you ever seen Memento?

The airport scene from *12 Monkeys* was very good, and I think it was well covered and closed at the end of the movie. It was filmed in the ballroom of the Reading Terminal Market, which was its old train shed.

It had such a dreamy, eerie feeling to it; it gave me chills each time they showed it, with Gilliam perfectly capturing the déjà vu effect.

Jim Burgess: I'm sure you've heard this before, but I wish I could take a magic wand and erase your guilt over Mara. It was such a horrible situation. I learned one new thing from your latest writing (I seem to remember you telling me about the knife once, or dreamed it). And that was how overweight Mara was. I somehow had her pegged as the wasting away skin and bones type. I'm not sure where I had that image from, but I had it. I don't imagine you often (or ever) showed us pictures. You're doing amazing things these days, that's amazing, and I hope you can feel good about being amazing.

At her biggest (which was maybe six months after she went to New Jersey the final time, our marriage officially ended in every way but legally) Mara would have hit about 450 pounds. Mind you, she'd never been thin; when we met in high school she was 155 or so, and only 5' 2", but she had a beautiful voluptuous figure at the time. Someday when I write the rest of the Mara story (which will

fill a book on its own – and yes I plan to do that) readers will see that, like many young girls, she was made to feel disgusting and fat when she was at a weight which she would have killed to return to years later.

I'm trying to remember if I ever had photos of either of us in Maniac's Paradise. I know a few of the cats made appearances. Obviously Andy York and Richard Weiss knew, as they saw her in person, but that was before she was at her worst. Eventually, while living with her sister, she had gastric bypass surgery and lost quite a bit of the weight. I believe she may have gotten close to 200 pounds again. Unfortunately, the psychological issues behind her weight had never really been resolved, and they resurfaced as soon as she no longer had the protection of all that fat to hide behind.

As to the guilt, I still feel it, but not as terribly as I once did. Writing helps, I suppose, and I see a therapist twice a month (as required by Probation). I also believe that I worked off a part of my guilt during my time in prison. Even if I don't think I should have been sent away for so long – if at all – my inner belief that I needed to be punished for perceived wrongs in my life found some satisfaction there.

I thought at one point I would want to see Across the Universe, but Charlotte correctly put the big kibosh on ANY thoughts I might have about seeing it. Nah, useless, useless, useless. Julie Taymor is a trip, I actually think she's sort of interesting in a train wreck sort of way. But you're right, if I'd started to see this movie, I wouldn't be able to get to the end. Another popular movie, I found totally boring was "Brokeback Mountain". I avoided it when it came out, and then recently finally got the DVD. It took a LOT of effort to sit through that one to the end. Heath Ledger really over did the accent, it almost needed subtitles.

Across the Universe made an interesting visual trailer...it made a terrible movie. I'm still getting some of the scenes out of my mind.

Conrad von Metzke: [In response to an email I sent questioning how he was surviving the California fires] Why, thanks for caring – but all's well with me, and unlikely to change. I'm really too far into the urban density to be in danger, short of something like the Tokyo firebombings of '45. In any case, though the fires are still burning, the winds have shifted, the humidity is returning, the heat is disappearing, and all that's really left in the city proper is ash and smoky air. I even unpacked my emergency evacuation suitcase, which I thought was a little silly anyway, but I suppose it really could be a Tokyo firebomb....

The news is still rambling on about how the fires are still huge and lots of work left to do, etc., and that's true, but as far as I'm aware any significant center of population is now out of danger – unless the winds shift again, but that seems unlikely now. Some of the evacuated people won't be allowed home for a couple more days, but at this point that's mostly precautionary – in fact they are allowed to go back under escort to retrieve things they need, but they can't stay.

So now it's brooms, and then insurance claims adjusters. Oh whoopee.... They still have lots of unsettled claims pending from the last big fire, in 2003.

How difficult is it to get proper insurance coverage there? Are the big carriers trying to avoid writing policies that cover fire? Speaking of which, what about earthquake insurance?

Cal White: Mara sounds like a girl I went out with for a couple of years back in my young, wild oats days. I was lucky she left me for somebody else. Good luck telling the story, but I do hope for more of your articles on prison life. I've never been unlucky enough to end up in jail, but most of my family has either been in jail or worked as guards at such.

I don't know how much luck (or lack of it) had to do with me going to prison. I think, in many ways, I was trying to sabotage my life for so long that I was lucky it resulted in prison instead of death or permanent injury.

Andy York: Enjoyed ES as always. Sorry to hear about Heather's ankle; but, glad it isn't anything too serious - more an inconvenience than a show-stopper. Best wishes for successful event tomorrow!!

I'm sorta surprised about your opening up about Mara to the gaming community. I know it was a difficult marriage and you did all you could to help and support her. But it is something, if it was me, that I would want to be a distant memory rather than reliving it. Is this part of the therapy/internal healing of your recovery program? In any case, I hope that this telling helps you move forward.

It does help, as I mentioned to Jim. Seriously, it isn't even close to being a distant memory for me...too many years, too many regrets, too many scars. So since I can't just forget it, my next option seems to be to live with it. And when I share the experiences, I hope readers can learn something from it, or at least find the details of my experience interesting in some way.

Haven't seen either of the two movies you listed. I did pick up Inland Empire on DVD (a Hollywood Video store was going out of business and they had excellent prices). I definitely need to set down and spend some time trying to figure the movie out. Seeing it in the theater made me wish I had a rewind button. If you'd like, when you're ready to watch it, let me know and I can loan you my copy.

I should check the store near here, even if its just VHS there are always some odd movies I want...like the 70's movie Homebodies, about the old folks trying to keep developers from making them move out of their building. I was at Blockbuster with Heather the other day and they had 4 used DVD's for \$20...the problem was we couldn't find 4 we wanted to own or give as gifts! Nothing but crap.

Yep, as you told Tom, I'm still around. He mentioned Dragon's Lair - that's my comic and gaming shop of record, thought they moved since Tom was here. They also have a branch now in San Antonio and one in Round Rock. I stop by once a week on "New Comic Day" (usually Wednesdays) to get my subscriptions.

I don't read new comics currently...every once in a while I wonder what might be out there. But my choices were so odd and eclectic that I could only get my fill through a subscription service run by Jack Curtin, where I was able to read through each Diamond catalog of upcoming comics and order whichever ones I wanted, at a discount to cover. I believe he still runs it, if anybody is interested. Let me know.

I'd forgotten about Whisper getting into my lap and purring. It was quite a surprise as I'm not a "pet" person at all. Maybe the cat was trying to change that (if so, it didn't work).

You know how some cats are – they only want to be near you if you don't like cats. I think Whisper just sensed what a nice guy you are!

You asked if "Mensa still has a newsletter or magazine?". The organization, local groups and SIGs all have some type of publication. However, none are Diplomacy related, though it would only take one person to restart the SIG.

I'd have to join Mensa first. I have nothing against the organization in general...it's just that since my mother was a member it sort of keeps me from being interested. After all, on the rare occasion when she paid bills, she had to round up to the nearest dollar because the pennies were too hard to compute!

Game Openings

Diplomacy (Black Press): Graham Wilson, Brad Wilson, Chris Babcock, Melinda Holley, Alexander Levinson, needs just two more. Getting close, who wants to join in the fun?

Balkan Wars VI (Black Press): Signed up: Jack McHugh, Graham Wilson, Brad Wilson, Brendan Whyte, needs two more. Rules and map on request, or you can find them online within Paul Bolduc's Boris the Spider site at: <http://members.aol.com/prbolduc/boris/hrules/BW6.html>

7X7 Gunboat Tournament (No Press): Needs seven. I would publish the results without maps most likely, although I might email maps to the players. Anybody interested?

Eternal Sunshine Game Section

By Popular Demand

Credit goes to Ryk Downes, I believe, for inventing this game (although his original version had the GM supply the starting letter as well). The goal is to pick something that fits the category and will be the "most popular" answer. You score points based on the number of entries that match yours. For example, if the category is "Cats" and the responses were 7 for Persian, 3 for Calico and 1 for Siamese, everyone who said Persian would get 7 points, Calico 3 and the lone Siamese would score 1 point. The cumulative total over 10 rounds will determine the overall winner. Anyone may enter at any point, starting with an equivalent point total of the lowest cumulative score from the previous round. If a person misses a round, they'll receive the minimum score from the round added to their cumulative total. And, if you want to submit some commentary with your answers, feel free to. The game will consist of 10 rounds. A prize will be awarded to the winner.

Round 8 Categories

1. A nation which no longer exists.
2. A style of music.
3. A tool.
4. A type of snake.
5. A soccer team.

<u>Player</u>	<u>Nation</u>	<u>Music</u>	<u>Tool</u>	<u>Snake</u>	<u>Soccer</u>	<u>Turn Score</u>	<u>Total</u>
Cal White	USSR	Rock	Hammer	Rattlesnake	Manchester Utd	45	276
Jamie McQuinn	USSR	Rock	Hammer	Rattlesnake	Manchester Utd	45	258
David Burgess	Galicia	Rock	Hammer	Boa Constrictor	Manchester Utd	30	246
Chris Babcock	USSR	Rock	Screwdriver	Rattlesnake	Manchester Utd	36	242
Dane Maslen	Yugoslavia	Jazz	Saw	Rattlesnake	LA Galaxy	20	233
W. Andrew York	USSR	Jazz	Hammer	Rattlesnake	Birmingham	34	231
David Partridge	USSR	Blues	Hammer	Cobra	Manchester Utd	31	221
Allison Kent	USSR	Jazz	Hammer	Boa Constrictor	Italy	26	219
Brad Martin	USSR	Rock	Axe	Rattlesnake	Manchester Utd	35	208
Brad Wilson	Yugoslavia	Jazz	Hammer	Rattlesnake	Manchester Utd	35	202
Joakim Spangberg	USSR	Rock	Hammer	Rattlesnake	Manchester Utd	45	192
Melinda Holley	Sumeria	Blues	Hammer	Rattlesnake	DC United	25	188
Martin Burgdorf	Yugoslavia	Rock	Hammer	Viper	LA Galaxy	25	185
Brendan Whyte	Tibet	Hip-hop	Hammer	Cobra	Brazil, 1982	16	161
Kevin Wilson	NMR	NMR	NMR	NMR	NMR	16	158
Jeremie Lefrancois	Atlantis	Rock	Screwdriver	Rattlesnake	French Natl Team	22	152

Congrats to Cal White, Jamie McQuinn, and Joakim Spangberg who all got the maximum score of 45 this turn! Only two rounds left, with Cal still in the lead. Can he be stopped?

Selected Comments By Category: **Nation** – Andy York "USSR still gets more press than many other nations that are no longer around unless you go WAY back to Rome." **Music** – Andy York "If you used "type" of music, I might have gone with Rock or Country. However, you used style which leads into Jazz"

Round 9 Categories – Deadline is December 26th, 2007

1. A bank.
2. An Abba song.
3. A non-primary color.
4. A John Wayne movie.
5. A salad dressing type or flavor.

By Popular Opinion

In this By Popular Demand variant invented by Allan Stagg, the questions are subjective, e.g. "Who is or was the best rock guitarist of all time?" The goal is to pick something that fits the category and will be the "most popular" answer. You score points based on the number of entries that match yours. For example, if the category is "What

breed of cats are the friendliest?" and the responses were 7 for Persian, 3 for Calico and 1 for Siamese, everyone who said Persian would get 7 points, Calico 3 and the lone Siamese would score 1 point. The cumulative total over 10 rounds will determine the overall winner. Anyone may enter at any point, starting with an equivalent point total of the lowest cumulative score from the previous round. If a person misses a round, they'll receive the minimum score from the round added to their cumulative total. And, if you want to submit some commentary with your answers, feel free to; players are encouraged to submit press justifying their choices. The game will consist of 10 rounds. A prize will be awarded to the winner.

Round 2 Categories

1. What is the worst-tasting fruit juice?
2. What is the prettiest eye color?
3. Who was the greatest author of the 20th century?
4. Who was the worst American President?
5. What is the best-tasting brand of beer?

<u>Player</u>	<u>Juice</u>	<u>Eye Color</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>President</u>	<u>Beer</u>	<u>Turn Score</u>	<u>Total</u>
W. Andrew York	Prune	Blue	Hemingway	GW Bush	Guinness	29	47
Jamie McQuinn	Prune	Blue	Hemingway	GW Bush	Guinness	29	43
David Burgess	Prune	Blue	JRR Tolkien	Nixon	Guinness	22	35
Martin Burgdorf	Tropicana	Blue	Steinbeck	GW Bush	Budweiser	19	29
John Colledge	Pomengranate	Blue	Mark Twain	GW Bush	Douglas Adams	18	28
Brendan Whyte	V-8	Blue	Nabakov	GW Bush	Karaghanda	18	28
Joakim Spangberg	Prune	Brown	Stanislaw Lem	GW Bush	Guinness	23	28
Brad Wilson	Prune	Brown	Flannery O'Connor	Buchanan	Guinness	17	26
Chris Babcock	Grapefruit	Blue	Heller	Coolidge	Clipper City Gold	12	24
Melinda Holley	Prune	Green	Taylor Caldwell	Buchanan	Budweiser	14	24
Tom Swider	Prune	Hazel	F. Scott Fitzgerald	GW Bush	Yeungling	18	24
Jeremie Lefrancois	Grapefruit	Green	JRR Tolkien	GW Bush	Heineken	15	20

Congrats to Andy York and Jamie McQuinn who each received the highest possible score of 29. Now the question is, are you two guys giving the answers you believe in, or the answers you think will be popular? I am glad to see many of you doing the latter, even if it means you'll do as badly as I normally do!

Selected Comments By Category: **Juice** – Tom Swider "Prune juice is just terrible; you have to be senile to even consider drinking it." **Eye Color** – Tom Swider "I always thought blue eyes were a bit artificial." **Author** – Tom Swider "The Great Gatsby IS "The Great American Novel", with "Breakfast At Tiffany's" close behind. Fitzgerald's "Tender is the Night" is also good though a painfully autobiographical. Been reading Raymond Carver recently and really like his style and breadth of topics (much better than John Updyke in my opinion). Last year from Australia, the movie Jindabyne (starring Laura Linney) was partially based upon Carver's story "So Much Water So Close to Home." I also rate Haruki Murikami high, but am sure nobody else would think to put him down." Andy York "You could have given a genre, Heinlein, Poe, Steinbeck, Asimov all come quickly to mind amongst many, many others." **President** - Tom Swider "There may be worse Presidents, but our current one is the worst one during my lifetime, and Reagan the best." Andy York "I'm surprised you didn't say "former" as this is likely a slam dunk considering current opinion. Personally, it'd be a toss-up between Andrew Johnson or Grant for my choice." Chris Babcock "If Americans paid any attention to history, he'd be the poster child for the disastrous economic policy. **Beer** – Tom Swider "Yuengling is official Pig Board stock; it would compare favorably with Shiner Boch." Andy York "My preference is Shiner but it is only a regional beer." Chris Babcock "I was drinking some in Baltimore (about 2 blocks from Avalon Hill's old 'HQ') many years ago and the man next to me asked how that compared to a Bud Light. The bartender said, "If you were drinking what he is, you could piss a Bud Light." The Bud Light, of course, would not have as much of a head."

Round 3 Categories – Deadline is December 26th, 2007

1. What country has the best flag design?
2. What is the best airline?
3. Who is the greatest painter ever?
4. What is the worst topping for a pizza?
5. What is the best department store?

**Deadline For The Next Issue of Eternal Sunshine:
December 26th, 2007 – See You Then!**